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CIA's use of journalists is a chilling practice

Keeping a critical distance from the subject is important for unbiased journalism. Without that distance, a journalist cannot produce the straightforward, factual reporting Americans have rightfully come to expect.

Admiral Stansfield Turner, the director of central intelligence, does not share — and appears not to understand — that view.

Speaking to the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors last week, he said: "If you slant the news because you are on our payroll, that's bad... but it is your choice whether a relationship with us, providing information to us, somehow profanes your work."

Turner was talking about journalists working for the CIA. He said that in three separate cases he had approved the use of journalists for secret intelligence operations — although he added that in none of the cases was a journalist actually pressed into service. Turner told the editors that the CIA would continue to use journalists for intelligence purposes when information could not be gathered in other ways.

The editors were dismayed. It is not a question, as the admiral thinks, of editors choosing whether a reporter's association with the CIA "profanes" the reporter's work. The simple truth is that when a journalist works for government his journalism is automatically suspect of bias. Turner suggests that he will encourage

journalists to work for the CIA in secret. Readers will not know if that happens. Neither will editors. Suspicion will fall on all foreign correspondents.

Other journalists then find it difficult to retain the trust of their sources. In a country like Iran, the suspicion that journalists are secretly CIA agents can obviously endanger their lives.

"You have put into question the real purpose of American foreign correspondents and you have cast doubt on the ethical position of every American correspondent abroad," A. M. Rosenthal, executive editor of The New York Times, told Turner.

Turner professed to find the concerns of the editors "naive." In the world as viewed from the CIA, that is understandable. In the world of newspapers and their readers, the concerns are critically important.

Readers need to feel confident that they are not getting the news as seen by Jimmy Carter or Stansfield Turner or Ruhollah Khomeini. The reporter's obligation is to readers and not to government, or even to the financial interests of his or her own publication.

The indications are that two of the journalists whose recruitment Turner approved for CIA activities were part-timers and that one was a foreign journalist. The great body of American foreign correspondents clearly would not accept assignments from the CIA.